

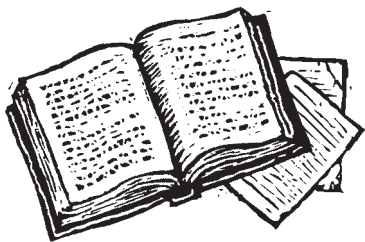
The American Feminist Dream

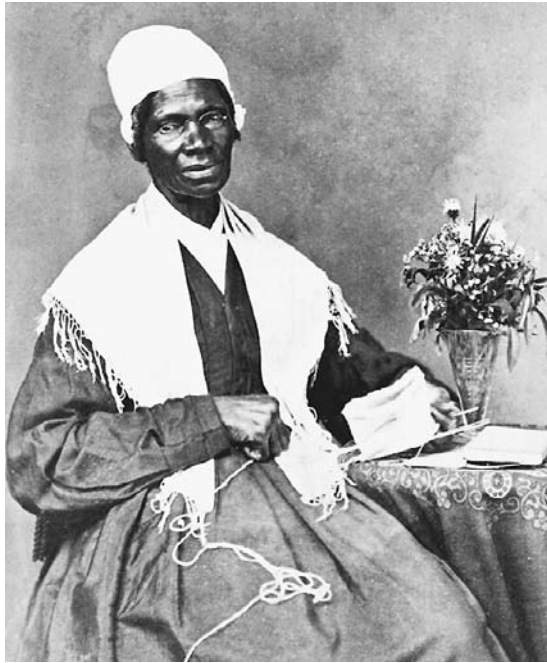
Introduction

In the early years of the country, the traditional American dream of forging a new frontier, achieving instant success, and assuming a new and prosperous identity was not readily available to women. Men would take the lead in building the United States, claiming property, forming a legal system, and declaring their independence. Women certainly supported these ideals, working alongside their husbands, brothers, and sons to hoe the progress of a new nation. However, their unyielding efforts did not automatically grant them a voice in determining the direction America would grow. Because the opinions of women were not taken into consideration professionally, socially, or politically, women had to fight to be heard and seen.

The American Revolution gave many women the opportunity to contribute to the birth of the nation as men left their homes for war. Women raised funds to support the republic, kept family businesses running successfully, and took care of domestic activity. Abigail Adams tried to encourage her husband, John, then a member of the Continental Congress, to recognize this emerging independence. In 1776, in a letter to John, Abigail tells him to “Remember the Ladies” as he and the other congressmen create a new code of laws following the colonists’ break from Britain.

In the 1830s, the abolitionist movement inspired women to examine the similarities





Sojourner Truth Getty Images

between how society regarded slaves and women. For many women, the struggle for slaves' rights was a struggle for human rights. Following the Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Loyal Women's League, which argued for the right to vote, not only for women but also for people of any race or color. However, despite the progressive leadership of Stanton and others, the women's vote was not secured until 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Like the American Revolution, both World Wars opened doors for women to actively participate, both vocally and physically. Edna St. Vincent Millay, the first woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, dared to offer her bitter take on the state of the world, anticipating World War II with her poem, "Apostrophe to Man." Millay unequivocally points a finger at "Homo called sapiens," the entity she believes responsible for humanity's downfall. Millay is brutally honest, even harsh, about a topic of universal concern, reflecting women's growing boldness in society.

Socially and economically, the demands of World War II pulled hundreds of thousands of

women into civilian and military efforts; however, when men returned home from the fronts, women lost their status in the workforce. For the next few decades, women not only battled to maintain a presence in industry, but also rallied for equal pay. During the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of feminism swept across America, demanding equal treatment for women. Literature of this time promoted activism and solidarity, introducing public conversations about taboo subjects such as abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and domestic violence. In 1963, Eleanor Roosevelt was the chairperson on the Commission on the Status of Women, which chronicled discriminatory practices against women, while Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, a manifesto commenting on the undeniable restriction in traditional female roles.

Feminism soon became a hotbed of antagonism as some thought the term reflected an anti-male philosophy, rather than one based on women's empowerment. Many women also believed that the feminist movement focused too much on the experiences of white women and assumed a universal female identity. In the 1980s, the third wave of feminism emerged and embraced advocacy for all genders, races, and sexualities.

The Woman Question

Margaret Fuller, a famous woman of letters in the nineteenth century, started public "conversations" for women, which borrowed from the model of study groups and reading parties. During these gatherings, Fuller encouraged women to express themselves freely and to act on their ideas. In discussing the "woman question" in her piece "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" (1845), Fuller argues the importance of women's roles in the future if "every path [were] laid open to woman as freely as man":

We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no discordant collisions, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue.

Between 1851 and 1872, Fanny Fern (the pen name of Sara Willis) published a weekly syndicated newspaper column that also addressed problems relative to women. Fern covered the topics of women's suffrage, women's rights within the family unit, and female perseverance, in addition to depression, matrimony, and feminine attire. In her semi-autobiographical *Ruth*



Margaret Fuller © Corbis

Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time, Fern portrays a young widow and single mother who uses her wits, not her wiles, to support her family.

Freedom and Equality

Like Fuller and Fern, Sojourner Truth spoke to her audience about equality and rights for women, as well as for all genders and races. However, as a former slave, Truth presented a personal and powerful perspective on the privileges and rights denied women. In 1851, while Fern united women through print, Truth urged those who stood before her at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, to listen and act, dismissing the argument that women and blacks were less capable: "What's [intellect] got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?" She went on to rally the audience by telling them, "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and

get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Old Nanny seems to channel Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech as she comforts her granddaughter Janie Crawford and talks about the past: "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin.'" Hurston wrote her novels at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s, but she echoes Truth's affirming view of the future. But in contrast to Truth, Hurston's Old Nanny seeks a different type of action from her young listener. She ultimately sees the wealth and security that a man can offer as the keys to Janie's happiness. Janie, on the other hand, grows into an independent woman who speaks her mind, relies on her instincts, and even plays checkers, much to men's chagrin. Janie challenges the male chauvinism in her town, and during a public



George McGovern addressing a woman's caucus, with Gloria Steinam and Bella Abzug © Bettmann/Corbis

conversation when Joe Lindsay reports that a friend “says beatin’ women is just like steppin’ on baby chickens,” Janie calls the men on their righteousness: “It’s so easy to make yo’ self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens.”

Social, Sexual, and Spiritual Awakening

Like Janie Crawford, Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* is desperate to find herself and surges against the restrictions placed against her. A young white wife and mother in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century, she travels a hard road to self-discovery and begins to recognize her own desires. Both Edna’s and Janie’s awakenings grow from their relationships with men; just as they become more aware of their sexuality, they become more aware of themselves as viable human beings. A “true woman,” they realize, does not have to be pure and pious. She can acknowledge her body and the sensations incited within it. Edna sees something beyond her “colorless existence” and “blind contentment,” and at the end of the story, she stands nude on the beach like a “new-

born creature opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.” As she swims out to sea and drowns from exhaustion, Edna represents a cohort of women who felt impossibly trapped in their bodies and unfulfilled by their expected roles. Although they saw the possibility of empowerment, they did not see the reality of it.

More than sixty years later, Betty Friedan addresses a similar sense of hopelessness in *The Feminine Mystique*:

If a woman had a problem in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it.

By exposing the inner conflicts of women in traditional roles, Friedan gave hope to those who felt limited by their responsibilities as “dutiful” females. *The Feminine Mystique* was the catalyst for the second wave of feminism and

helped amplify the discussion about civil rights for women.

Dreams in Reality

Friedan's study of conventional roles paved the way for activists like Angela Davis, whose progressive *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), went one step further in expanding conversations about women's rights. In chronicling the women's movement, Davis discusses how race and class affect the movement as a whole and shows how the first and second waves of feminism neglected to embrace all women in its goals and achievements. She explores the oppression of African American women, as well as working-class women and immigrants, and suggests that the differences in race, class, and sex need to be acknowledged to achieve equality.

Joyce Carol Oates speaks to the reality of the working class in her novel *Them*, with a fictional portrait of a family from Detroit whose failed plans and broken dreams from the 1930s to the 1960s are rooted in the slums. Oates tells the story of the Wendall family, whose women experience the American dream through the nightmares of rape, prostitution, and domestic violence. Maureen and Loretta have few chances and even fewer opportunities to free themselves. They symbolize the women Davis identifies in her book: those women who have been forgotten in the quest for women's liberation.

Throughout her career as a poet, Adrienne Rich has spoken for those people who have been forgotten, or denied a voice. In 1997, she refused an invitation to accept the National Medal of the Arts award at the White House, prompted by the elimination of federal arts funding. In her commentary about her refusal, Rich writes, "Art is both tough and fragile. It speaks of what we long to hear and what we dread to find. Its source and native impulse, the imagination, may be shackled in early life, yet may find release in conditions offering little else to the spirit."

In her poem, "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich celebrates a love affair that has brought joy late in life:

No one has imagined us. We want to live like
trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

Rich has used her work to explore both feminist and American ideals: freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness.

Like Rich, Gloria Naylor also celebrates the colorful spirit of the women who inhabit a neighborhood, and although the neighborhood seems somewhat exiled, Naylor portrays seven women of Brewster Place as triumphant, tenacious, and alive. At the end of the novel, Naylor writes,

The colored daughters of Brewster . . . still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they're mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they're diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, but never disappear.

In the same way, Alice Walker champions the independence and tenacity of an African American woman named Celie in the novel *The Color Purple*. Well into the novel, Celie's husband, the emotionally and physically abusive Mr. _____, confronts her. She records the conversation in one of her letters to God, letters which comprise the novel's entire narrative: "Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman . . . you nothing at all." Later, Celie acknowledges his claims, yet finds power in her identity and existence: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. . . . But I'm here."

Conclusion: The Future of Feminist Dream

In her preface to *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan introduces her ground-breaking treatise as one of simple humanism:

My answers may disturb the experts and women alike for they imply social change. But there would be no sense in my writing this book at all if I did not believe that women can affect society as well as be affected by it; that, in the end, a woman, as a man, has the power to choose, and to make her own heaven or hell.

Four decades later, American women stand on the shoulders of the giants that came before them—the Abigail Adamses, the Fanny Ferns, the Sojourner Truths, the Angela Davises—and dream of new heavens, to see new horizons, and to claim new triumphs than their foremothers dared imagine. Today's feminist American dream does not hinge on the dreamer's gender, race, wealth, beauty, or even nationality; it is rooted in the past, facing toward the future,



I THINK THAT 'TWITH THE NEGROES OF THE
SOUTH AND THE WOMEN AT THE NORTH, ALL TALKING
ABOUT RIGHTS, THE WHITE MEN WILL BE IN A FIX
PRETTY SOON."

Source: Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?"

and propelled by each dreamer's belief in her own worth.

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